

Questions and Answers for the Jeff Christensen Fatality Investigation, Search Efforts, and Park Policies and Procedures

1) What was determined as the cause of Jeff's death?

According to the Larimer County Coroner, Jeff suffered a left temporal skull fracture that led to a subdural hematoma. The temporal skull fracture caused significant internal bleeding inside the head. This increased pressure on the brain renders a person unconscious and leads to death.

2) What time was he injured and when did he die?

The Larimer County Coroner placed the time of Jeff's injury at mid-PM, 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. with the time of death to be late-PM, 6:00 p.m. to midnight July 29, 2005.

3) Where was Jeff's body found?

Jeff's body was found in the drainage that runs east from the saddle between Mount Chiquita and Ypsilon Mountain. He was lying among large boulders near the edge of willow bushes. It is unclear as to the exact route that Jeff took as he descended from the divide into this drainage. Terrain is a mix of steep to moderate slopes that are scattered with boulders, scree, cliff- bands, and snow gullies. The most obvious and likely descent from the saddle between Chiquita and Ypsilon traverses relatively easy terrain directly into the drainage, either down scree slopes or snow.

4) Were any clues found as to where he fell and what kind of fall caused his injury?

The exact route Jeff took as he descended from the mountain is not known and the location where he fell and received his fatal injury is unknown and may never be known. At some point he took an unintentional tumbling fall, possibly on a snow field, over a short rock/cliff section, or over other unstable terrain and sustained the injury to his head that ultimately caused his death. In addition, he bruised his hip, cut his wrist, had numerous scrapes and lacerations and tore his clothing in several places. It may also be possible that he was struck by rock fall, and then as a result, fell.

It is believed however, that after falling and receiving his injury, Jeff reached into his backpack, and removed a tee shirt and wrapped it around his head to control the bleeding. Christensen may also have entered his backpack to retrieve his NPS uniform Gore-Tex jacket which was on his body when he was discovered. It is believed that Christensen then walked, to the location in which he was discovered.

At least two heavy rains were documented during the search and rescue operation, from the time of Jeff's death until his body was found. Therefore, such evidence like tracks in snow banks may have been washed away or melted. In spite of several thorough searches of the area, no additional evidence that would provide information on the location of his fall was discovered.

5) What was the weather like at the time of the accident?

The weather on July 29, 2005 was clear and the winds were calm. There was no afternoon cloud build-up and no lightning observed. Weather is not expected to have been a factor in this accident.

6) What route did Jeff take?

Jeff's scheduled patrol was along the Chapin Pass Trail. During conversations with his coworker who transported Jeff to the Chapin Pass Trailhead, several specific routes were discussed. Jeff ultimately settled on hiking the Mount Chapin, Mount Chiquita, Ypsilon Mountain route to Lawn Lake and the Lawn Lake Trailhead. We know from witness accounts that Jeff left the Chapin Pass Trailhead and hiked to the summit of Mt. Chiquita. From here, rather than continuing north, he descended to the east. His exact descent route is unknown, but photos he took that day pinpoint his location at several spots on Mount Chiquita. It appears that he descended one of the north facing gullies below the summit of Mount Chiquita where he took two photographs of bighorn sheep.

7) Had you searched the area where his body was eventually found?

Yes. When Jeff was not found along his planned patrol route, other areas where he may have gone were considered and this route below Mt. Chiquita was thought to be a likely area. Consequently, we searched the area where Jeff was found numerous times and with different types of search resources. We searched this area during our initial hasty search, with dog teams, aerial search operations and with infrared equipment from the helicopter. Throughout the course of the seven day search we expanded into other areas, reacting to the few clues we had, but we also continued to put resources in this area. The terrain where he was found was rugged and exposed and it was determined that if he was in that terrain he was likely no longer alive.

Searchers have indicated that they may have walked or passed within 30 feet of where Jeff was ultimately found. Also, if the winds were different on the night of Saturday July 30, a dog team that was inserted to a location within approximately ¼ mile from where Jeff was found may have been able to alert on Jeff's location.

The hiker who found Jeff was at just the right place, looking at just the right angle to see Jeff's green pants among granite talus and large boulders.

8) Do you have concerns that a hiker found Jeff rather than a searcher?

We are extremely grateful to the hiker who found Jeff. National Park Service staff decided to keep the search area open for the sole purpose of having more eyes and ears for any possible clues to find Jeff. Searches sometimes end without the victim being found. Finding Jeff allowed his family, friends and coworkers to have a Memorial Service in his honor and have some degree of closure.

9) What was the condition of Jeff's radio and was it working?

Jeff was equipped with a Rocky Mountain National Park handheld portable radio (Bendix King), 5 watt output, which was with him when he was located. The radio appeared to have outward damage of a cosmetic nature (scrapes/scratches and a cracked display window) when it was recovered. The radio was evaluated by the Larimer County Sheriff's Office radio shop for functionality, including "transmit" and "receive" capability, battery condition and capacity, frequencies, etc. The radio was functional with all tests indicating performance within normal limits/tolerances, however the exact battery charge and hence the capability at the time of the accident is unknown for certain.

The hiker who discovered Jeff contacted Rocky Mountain National Park staff utilizing a personal cell phone from that location.

10) Was there radio coverage where Jeff's body was found?

On August 11, 2005, a Rocky Mountain National Park ranger tested a same National Park Service (NPS) radio from a position next to the ground in the location where Ranger Christensen's radio was found. The radio both transmitted and received clearly on Channel 1 (line of sight) to park dispatch. The Twin Sisters (Mountain) repeater is also within range for radio transmit and receive from that location.

11) Would his injury have prevented him from speaking?

We are unable to speculate as to why Jeff did not contact park dispatch. We will never know whether it was due to his injury or due to his battery not working on his radio. However, we do know that there is radio coverage in the area where he fell and was found and that his radio was operational. However, we do not know the status of his radio battery when he was injured.

It is possible that Jeff was unaware of the severity of his injury.

12) What was the condition of Jeff's gun?

Jeff carried on his waist the NPS web duty belt holding his Model 228 SIG Sauer 9mm pistol with two ammunition magazines in pouches (all rounds were accounted for).

On August 3, the fifth day of the search, visitors reported hearing gunshots in the search area. On the night of August 3, rangers responded to the reported location and stationed themselves at critical areas. One of them discharged their weapon to elicit a response. Another ranger in a different location reported hearing a response shot a few minutes later. More rangers were then brought in to the area and spread out along the road and trails to listen for more responses. No new gun shot responses were heard. It is unknown what the sources of the gunshots were that the visitors and later a ranger reported hearing. Possession of firearms in Rocky Mountain National Park is illegal. The most likely explanation is that someone was in the area with an illegal firearm and, perhaps knowing that Jeff was armed, returned fire when they heard the gunshot fired by the ranger. Initial reports of gunshots heard by park visitors may have been the echo of vehicle back-fire along Fall River or Trail Ridge Road.

13) What was Jeff carrying with him?

He was wearing a Green NPS Gore-tex rain parka, uniform shirt with name tag and badge, ball cap, green field pants, white socks and leather hiking boots with rubber lug soles. He carried on his waist the NPS web duty belt holding his Model 228 SIG Sauer 9mm pistol, two ammunition magazines in pouches (all rounds were accounted for), expandable baton holder, and a pepper spray (OC) canister in its holster, issued Bendix-King radio unit, small carabineer with keys and a small Swiss army knife.

He was carrying his personal daypack which, when found was in the open position and contained the following: Tree Saw, National Geographic Topographic map of the park, Citation book with un-issued violation notices, Collateral Fine Schedule, Two empty plastic grocery bags, Kodak digital camera with case and USB adapter, Hydration bladder, approximately 1/3 full of water, Large plastic bottle with colored liquid, presumably kool-aid or Gatorade, approximately one-third full and Headlamp, in working order.

It is believed that Jeff reached into his backpack and removed a tee shirt and wrapped it around his head to control the bleeding. Due to evidence that he did open and reach in to his backpack, it is possible that there may have been other standard items that he was carrying with him that were not found and therefore are unknown. His sunglasses and ball cap were not found.

14) What are the general reasons for conducting backcountry patrols in Rocky Mountain National Park?

Rocky Mountain National Park is approximately 415 square miles and receives approximately 3 million visitors annually. The park comprises over 114 named peaks above 10,000 feet in elevation and has some of the most rugged, variable, and fragile mountain terrain in the United States. Backcountry rangers patrol over 350 miles of trails and large off-trail areas. Park Service rangers are responsible for the protection of park resources, and the education of the public concerning a variety of issues including safety. Rangers participate in hundreds of search and rescue operations involving visitors every year. In order to assist park visitors who may get injured or lost in the backcountry, rangers must be extremely familiar with the backcountry.

They are also responsible for monitoring changing environmental conditions and tracking ongoing safety or resource concerns. Rangers help prevent resource damage and user conflicts and educate visitors regarding park rules and regulations, Leave No Trace ethics, and backcountry safety. Camping in the backcountry of the park is only allowed in designated areas. Rangers patrol to determine if illegal camping is taking place, including illegal fire activity. They detect unknown hazards such as avalanche activities, blow downs on trails, stream flooding etc. They also patrol to detect potential visitor/wildlife conflicts and violation of laws such as poaching.

15) Are you changing your policy at Rocky Mountain National Park pertaining to solo backcountry patrols?

Park staff determine backcountry patrols on a case by case basis. Staff consider their experience, the terrain and the particular mission. Sometimes rangers will patrol with others, for instance if a technical climbing patrol is planned.

Most law enforcement officers patrol alone. Game Wardens, Forest Service Rangers, Bureau of Land Management Rangers, Highway Patrol Officers, Rural County Sheriff's Deputies, US Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agents to name a few, patrol alone. National Park Service rangers too, often patrol alone in the backcountry and front country. Front country law enforcement situations, such as pulling over a vehicle or responding to a domestic abuse incident in a campground are potentially much more dangerous than backcountry situations. These rangers and other law enforcement officers are trained to practice situational awareness and risk management.

Although many agency law enforcement officers are alone they are normally connected with a communication center. That is a vital link to safe operations.

Rangers will continue to conduct solo patrols in both front country and backcountry areas. We will continue to strive to have rangers and other staff in

the backcountry maintain contact with the park dispatch center and emphasize that connecting with park dispatch regularly and often is a priority.

Jeff's accident could happen to anyone in that environment. Those who are experienced are not invincible. Falls are the number one cause of death in Rocky Mountain National Park. The park's backcountry terrain, where visitors and the rangers who protect visitors and protect the resources travel, is rugged and steep. The wilderness of the park is not a controlled environment, it is not a risk free environment, nor is the job of a park ranger free of risk.

16) Why do you educate visitors who come to Rocky Mountain National Park to not hike alone, yet you allow your backcountry rangers to travel alone?

Rangers have a direct communication link with park dispatch, visitors do not. Rangers are well trained and experienced in a variety of areas and are prepared for a variety of circumstances, some visitors are not. Some park visitors do hike alone; we encourage those visitors to be prepared, to let someone know where they are going and when they expect to be out of the backcountry.

17) What have you emphasized to your staff who are in the backcountry alone?

The park's existing policies have been re-emphasized to staff. This includes the reiteration of filing a "flight-plan" when patrolling or traveling in the backcountry, particularly if alone. This also includes calling in to the park's communication center, park dispatch, to communicate any deviations from that flight plan or relay traveling through potentially hazardous terrain. We have also re-emphasized to park staff to carry a spare radio battery. We continue to emphasize the importance of situational awareness and risk management to our staff.

18) What was Jeff's level of experience and training?

Jeff attended and completed a seasonal Law Enforcement Academy in California in December 2001. He had four seasons of experience as a commissioned law enforcement officer at Rocky Mountain National Park. As a seasonal commissioned ranger, he was trained to established standards of the National Park Service Law Enforcement Program, and had attended extensive training during 2005 and previous years that included Search and Rescue Operations, Emergency Medical Care, High Angle Rescue, Law Enforcement Field Training, backcountry safety and survival, situational awareness and risk management, navigation, and Whitewater Rescue. Jeff was an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), an experienced mountaineer and worked ski patrol at Winter Park for seven seasons.

19) Is Rocky Mountain National Park planning on using personal locator devices?

Technology continues to change and adapt pertaining to personal locator devices. These devices are a tool just like portable radios are tools. The most important form of technology that we currently use is radios. Most personal locator devices must be activated. We will continue to research potential uses of technology and tracking mechanisms to determine whether they might enhance operations and be practical and reliable at Rocky Mountain National Park.

20) How many rangers have been killed in Rocky Mountain National Park?

Jeff Christensen was the first ranger killed in the backcountry of Rocky Mountain National Park. Park Ranger Kenneth Meenan was killed in a Motor Vehicle Accident on August 13, 1934. Park Ranger Nathaniel Lacy was killed in a Motor Vehicle Accident that occurred on June 23, 1966. Rocky Mountain National Park was established in 1915.